

MIRROR OF LIULICHANG

BY A. E. CLARK

A disc gleams dully on a stand;
Wrought dragons, verso, coil to spring.
The browsing Stranger lifts his hand
And reads the tag: *Bronze mirror, Ming.*
From Liulichang Jie,¹ lanterns cast
Red glimmers on its tarnished face.
At first he thinks of China's past,
But that's not what these shadows trace.

A carrier looms into a windswept bay
 Beneath a crimson flag. Her decks are taut.
Ashore, the vassal children quit their play
 And gape at the approaching juggernaut.
Bleak was the toil of millions, night and day,
 But deft their leaders: victories unfought
Secured the central realm. Though they suppress
Some freedoms, who will quarrel with success?

"Perhaps," he mutters, while outside
A limo parts a crowd of men.
The image ripples like a tide
Uncertain, turning. Look again.

Plumes of black smoke reach up to choke the sky
 As chaos spreads, a dozen cities burning.
Where hustling aspiration aimed so high
 A disillusioned rage leaves riot churning.
The grand construction, founded on a lie,
 Proved fragile in a shocking moment's learning:
One shoddy dam, or plague at first concealed;
Jobs lost; official theft (again) revealed.

The Stranger shudders as if sick,
But then he sees, out in the rain,
A child retrieve an old man's stick.
The bronze is glowing: look again.

Grimly a rustic plaintiff takes the stand.
 By turns the sleek defendant smirks and glowers
At judges he can't purchase or command.
 Both sides are heard. With independent powers
The courts maintain a balance in the land.
 Throughout the civil space, humaneness flowers
And no one marvels: few recall the time
To practice law was punished as a crime.

"May it be so," the Stranger prays.
 The Dealer smiles, polite.
The treasure's bought and swiftly wrapped
 (He's got to catch a flight).
Alone, the Dealer finds a box,
 Replaces what was sold:
A mirror strangely like the first—
 As lovely, and as old.

1. A street in Beijing known for its antique shops